

Signs of a New Park

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Natural (social) orders

It is part of the ambiguous heritage of modernism that today the normal urban response to a looming environmental crisis is to want to tear buildings down. If the corruption of nature is one of modernism's legacies, so too is the illusion that nature can be repaired by disguising its mediated histories behind a veil of grass and trees. This illusion is the legacy of Romanticism and more specifically of landscape art, whose adherents resisted the industrialization of life and space by depicting an aestheticized green landscape empty of buildings and smoke. Beauty was redefined through this movement as the absence of human presence, as a "natural order" completely independent of human thought or action. This natural order was itself just another human construct (we like to remind ourselves) created by an active will of imagination within and against a society that was bent on destroying nature, but at the same time hiding that tension behind a veil of trees and light.

This approach to landscape gave modern nature conservancy what one nature writer calls "an absolutist ethic; man or nature, it says, pick one. As soon as history or circumstance blurs that line, it gets us into trouble."¹ The community struggle over prospective re-use of the former Toronto Transit Commission (hereafter TTC) barns at St Clair and Christie, in midtown Toronto, is a contemporary illustration of the modern era's paradoxical response to its own constructions. Five brick streetcar barns with glass skylights and bricked-up windows once used by the TTC to store and repair their streetcars were abandoned when the TTC moved its yards to Dupont and Bathurst, and the barns, like the surrounding grounds, acquired a desolate, dilapidated appearance. Local sentiment was that the city should acquire the property from the TTC and make it into a park. That consensus was quickly embraced and just as quickly lost, through a prolonged struggle over the meanings and possibilities imaginable in the name of "park." As Councillor Joe Mihevc summed it up, everyone imagines the word "park" differently: Imagine you're on the couch...and the therapist flashes a card bearing the word 'Park.' What image comes to mind? Garden, forest, soccer field, baseball diamond, playground, dog run... Everyone, in this

¹ Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996.

experience, will come up with a different answer.²

A sign that read “Site of a New Park” was painted, painted over by others, and taken down; flowers were planted in the yards and then cut down to make way for the “park.” In the subsequent battle over the barns, the impulse to obscure the terrain of politics and power has been once again coupled with a romantic preference for a green park, 100% landscape, no buildings, no art. In this script nature is evoked simultaneously to serve power and to deny its presence.

The conflict began in the last municipal election, when two competing municipal councillors, running for one expanded ward in the downsized city government following the creation of the megacity, ran on the slogan "100% Park." Front porches in the neighbourhood carried the "100% park" sign with great hope and complacency. We would get a park, with grass and trees! The city would remove those decrepit eyesores and install a beautiful natural landscape! With the future of the park linked to the election, green space seemed to represent an ideal reconciliation of green beliefs and citizen power. The popular success of the 100% Park slogan enabled the winning candidate, Joe Mihevc, to persuade the city to acquire the property and preserve the site from higher density housing, which in the current climate of Toronto real estate is something of a miracle. But subsequent events have revealed passionate differences about the future of the site. Public meetings, feasibility studies, design proposals, citizens' groups, intensely dialogical websites, and one cursory politicians' vote over-riding all of these have revealed deep divisions about what creating a park actually means in this context.

²Lorinc, John. July 2002. Greened Acres, *Toronto Life*, p. 58.

Our article is a study of this process, the debates that have emerged, and the philosophies, hopes and desires that so powerfully motivate its actors. The desire for a “park” has catalysed residents of this area in a way that no other issues--transit, smog, homelessness, the proliferation of junky dollar stores on St Clair (we leave aside the decimation of the schools, which falls into its own category of destruction and opposition)--seem unable to do. The debate has produced bitter arguments, lasting friendships, guerilla flower planting, a public art exhibition along St Clair with fifty art students’ photographic interpretations of the barns, forty-five midnight deputations to Midtown City Council, stacks of studies circulating from one kitchen to another, and two websites.

“What we have invented for ourselves,” muses Jerry Zaslove in a recent article on memory and space, is a kind of social death that has infiltrated the cities and communities and has ended how institutions, that have traditionally formed around art and social movements, have created audiences and spectators for art... Another way of putting this notion of civilizational change is that we have been robbed of the physical spaces in which traditional communities formed their defenses in reaction to modernism and its duplicities.³

What urban critics have described, our neighbours, with their various social and cultural dispositions, have reacted to by becoming activists. The deterioration of public spaces; urban sprawl and the cannibalization of the “countryside;” the rapid alteration of landscapes under the pressures of global capital; all these have been motivating factors for people who want to resist thoughtless housing developments, fishy land development deals, more traffic, more urban angst. Everyone in the vicinity of the Wychwood barns wants this space to be restored to public use. Indeed the community’s defenses against commercial development have never been so alert, so pugnacious, or so gregarious. Through the debate between its factions, we have learned why a “post-modern” approach to the relationship between urban space and nature is being acted out in the streets of the city, why it is important to question the traditional sentiment for green space, and how we might replace the longing for green space with the more visionary alternative of green politics.

³ Zaslove, Jerry. Spring 2001. Decamouflaging Memory, or, How we are undergoing ‘Trials By Space’ While Utopian Communities are Restoring the Powers of Recall. *West Coast Line*, 34-35(1): 120.

Natural (social) history

To understand this site of cultural struggle around the definition of a “park” and to see how this fits into a larger social and political contestation around space and place, we need to address the location, history, and condition of the site at the time of the city’s acquisition of it, and describe the key figures, major events and turning points in the formation of a new park out of the old streetcar barns and surrounding yards.

To begin with, it is important to note the proximity of the new park to Wychwood Park, one of the four major garden suburbs created in Toronto in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Marmaduke Matthews, a landscape painter from Warwickshire who became involved in the Toronto Arts Movement, envisioned a co-operative artist’s colony in the form of a garden suburb. In 1888, a 22-acre subdivision with park preserve plan was registered with the Township of York. In 1891 builders began to build this private subdivision, known as Wychwood Park. Dotted with houses designed according to an Arts and Crafts aesthetic, the Park was strongly influenced by the natural landscape movement.⁴ Gradually, artists and architects moved in and added to the combined development of artists’ colony and garden suburb. In 1909, Wychwood Park was annexed by the city, but the residents have continued to maintain the infrastructure themselves so that the park’s ravine, pond, and old trees would be preserved. Ninety-three years later, some of the fiercest opposition to the proposed community and arts reuse of the nearby Wychwood Avenue TTC carbarns site would come from the owner of the largest, multimillion dollar house in Wychwood Park.

100 meters north of Wychwood Park, the carbarns occupy 28% of the 4.32 acre (1.8 hectares) site just south of St. Clair Avenue West, bordered by Christie Street to the west, Benson Avenue to the north, and Wychwood Avenue to the east. The site was a major streetcar transportation hub consisting of five streetcar maintenance barns built between 1913 and 1921. As Terry McAuliffe, Vice Chair of the Midtown Community Preservation Panel Board, wrote:

⁴ Fischer, Ron 1983. “The Development of the Garden Suburb in Toronto,” *Journal of Garden History*, 3(3), 193-207

When the contract to operate the city's transit services expired in 1921, the city created the Toronto Transportation Commission to incorporate all the independent streetcar lines around the city. By then the neighbourhoods along St Clair had filled in, and had taken the shape we recognize today as one of the most varied and liveable parts of the city. Newly appointed City Engineer and Commissioner of Public Works Roland Caldwell (RC) Harris... oversaw the construction of many of the city's monumental public works, including the Prince Edward Viaduct, the Victoria Park Water Filtration Plant - later named after him - and the St Clair Water Reservoir. The Wychwood Car Barns were among the first of those solid and enduring public works that we have inherited, thanks in large part to his vision and energy.⁵<http://www.anewpark.ca/comments.php>, accessed on September 29, 2002.

These other buildings have become icons in the culture of the city. By 1995, however, the carbarns site was used only for storage of some old Red Rocket cars, and for parking by TTC workers, who would cut through Wychwood Park by foot on their way to the streetcar yards at Dupont and Bathurst. By 1996, it was evident that the TTC was no longer going to use the carbarns and discussions about the future of the site began.

The first community group on the scene was the Taddlewood Heritage Association (hereafter Taddlewood), a nonprofit organization affiliated with the Ontario Historical Society, whose mandate was to "preserve the architectural and natural heritage" in the community.⁶

Their mission was to return the Wychwood site to the woodland setting that served the community before the carbarns were built. They imagined a "natural woodland park" with a "daylighted" portion of the Taddle Creek. Although the white oak forests of the original Lake Iroquois had made way for orchards and brickworks, eighty-seven years ago Taddle Creek still pooled to form "Poverty Pond". A 1915 photograph shows children skating on this frozen pond. Taddlewood's case for a park rested on the areas' existing low density, park deficiency, and on meeting some of the Toronto Environmental Task Force (2000) recommendations, which included increasing parks and natural areas, planting more trees,

⁵ McAuliffe, Terry, letter to Midtown Community Council,

⁶ For further information on the Taddlewood Heritage Association, call 416 658-3357.

reclaiming the city's buried creeks and streams, encouraging new methods of reducing and managing stormwater, reducing the amount of impermeable land, and increasing educational opportunities.

Taddlewood was active in the campaign for 100% Park, and in getting the two councillors who would later campaign for the newly formed Ward 21, Rob Davis and Joe Mihevc, to support the cause. Their members organized Winterfest, raised money selling hot-dogs and hot chocolate, and created a ice rink on the site to its park potential. They were instrumental in forging the early consensus in a community that became, after amalgamation, the newly created Ward of St. Paul's West.

At the municipal political level, the process of community consultation began quietly in May 1996 when Councillor Howard Joy conducted a survey. With twenty-six responses, it "generally showed a desire for the following uses on the site: park, with both active space (ball/basketball/soccer) and a water feature(splash pad/wading pool), recreation centre, with indoor uses to include a gymnasium and arts facilities, passive space, low rise residential and retention of existing building." The TTC announced its intention to demolish the carbarns in July 1996, but Taddlewood members concerned that the heritage site would be sold to private developers began to act to prevent demolition. In February and March 1998, a survey was conducted by the Parks and Recreation Department. Thirty-one responses "generally showed the desire for the following on the site: open space, playground, water play area, public washrooms, seniors program space and meeting room space". In April 1998, however, the Toronto City Council adopted a report from the Toronto Historical Board recommending that the site be listed in the City of Toronto Inventory of Heritage properties. In November 1998, ownership of the site was transferred from the TTC to the City of Toronto.

In May 2000, City planning staff held an open house and invited the local community to vote for one of four redevelopment options for the barns and the surrounding site. Of 136 voters, 85% chose Option 4, which advocated turning the majority of the site into a park and retaining the original 1913 barn for public use. Option 4 included the proviso that three residential lots would be parcelled off and sold to a private developer to fund the park. At the time of this vote, no architectural assessment had taken place and few people believed the barns were worth saving and reusing. Taddlewood organized numerous letters of support and a petition that was signed by over 600 people in support of Option 4. City Council

adopted Option 4 in October 2000 and commissioned an environmental and architectural assessment. In the local political campaign for councillor, culminating in the November 2000 election victory for Joe Mihevc over Rob Davis, the widely used slogan, endorsed by both candidates, was “100 per cent Park.”

The environmental assessment of the soil and groundwater conditions, carried out by Candec Consultants and delivered in December 2000, noted that the site was in good condition except for one corner where a tannery had operated before the barns were built. 825 cubic meters of soil would have to be removed but the remaining natural soil on the site would not require remediation. The “Preliminary Architectural, Structural, Mechanical and Electrical Inspection” Report prepared by Philip Goldsmith & Company Ltd. was completed in February 2001. The Goldsmith Report found that all of the barns were structurally sound and well-suited for adaptive re-use, and recommended saving all five barns. Then, in April 2001, at a Wychwood Barns Community Meeting chaired by Councillor Mihevc, Artscape was introduced as an organization that could accelerate the process of redeveloping the Wychwood Barns site for park and public uses. In June 2001, Councillor Mihevc recommended that Artscape conduct a Feasibility Study that would include live-work studios as one component of the barns.

Artscape, formed in 1986 in response to urban gentrification, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating space for the arts out of former police stations, schools, and derelict buildings.⁷ It was during the Artscape organized and led community consultation process that the first signs of local discontent about preliminary design concepts and the first clashes over the new park became public. The subsequent debate became acrimonious as Neighbours attempted to turn the genuine differences into social division and their children into aggrieved anti-Mihevcs who believed that their rights to outdoor recreation were being robbed by a conspiracy of artists and a traitorous politician. The popular consensus advanced by the 100% Park slogan was that the city should protect the site from being devoured by private real estate developers by making it into a city park. Since everyone agreed, no one bothered to elucidate exactly what

⁷ See <http://www.torontoartscape.on.ca/>

that meant, until Artscape’s involvement accelerated the process. As their Wychwood Barns Feasibility

Study notes:

This study has launched an intense debate in the local community and across Toronto about important issues and concerns. What is the role of an urban park and what should it look like? What is the value of preserving our heritage? What type of re-uses of the barns will serve the local community and which ones threaten to overwhelm the neighbourhood?⁸

Artscape's consultation process was far more extensive than any previous community consultations. Its purpose was to determine neighborhood needs, encourage dialogue, work with City staff, locate financial and cultural resources, demonstrate sustainable urban development, and develop a shared vision of the future of the site. In August 2001, a 5-member volunteer Wychwood Barns Advisory Council was formed to act as stewards of the consultation process. A City Working Group that included representatives from eight city divisions was also convened so that municipal planning would be an informed and coordinated process. In September 2001, Artscape circulated 2000 Arts and Community Surveys to assess the demand for rental space, the financial capacity of the sector, and the willingness of community-oriented organizations to provide programming for the neighborhood. Artscape then hired architects Joe Lobko and Michael McClelland, and in December, facilitated a design charette in which about 150 people heard a presentation and then, breaking down into workshop-sized groups, generated ideas and images following a presentation by Artscape and Joe Lobko. Lobko's slides of the actual reuse of industrial structures in park settings--the Don Valley Brickworks in Toronto and in various places in Europe and the U.S.--made quite an impression. The ideas that emerged from the design charette were developed into a preliminary drawing and this was presented to 350 members of the community at a public meeting on January 22, 2002.

Artscape evaluated their findings from these community consultations through a four part framework: (1) impact on local communities, (2) the public interest, (3) capital fundraising potential, and (4) operational sustainability. Included among their "related policy and principles" were statements from Parks and Recreation on special consideration for teenagers and the presence of programmed activities, and from Planning on parks as a focus for neighbourhood life. The Planning Department's statement emphasized access for citizens in the context of the Toronto's new Official Plan, and Jane Jacob's

⁸ Toronto Artscape Inc. May 2002. Wychwood Barns Feasibility Study, p. 25. Also available online at <http://www.torontoartscape.on.ca/main/425.newsmainwychwood.htm>

comment that “a genuine content of economic and social diversity, resulting in different people with different schedules, has meaning to the park and the power to confer the boon of life upon it.”⁹ They also recognized the impact of decreasing capital and maintenance budgets on the role of community groups. Cutbacks to parks and recreation budgets has led Parks and Recreation to suggest that non-profit civic stewardship initiatives can help to ensure maintenance, safety, education and fundraising in public parks.

Artscape’s “action research” yielded a range program components: a community arts barn, studio barn, green barn, covered street, and a children’s play area. The more barns that are retained, the greater the amount of community and arts space and the more dynamic the combination of uses to form an “urban ecology.” Options 3, 4, and 5 were deemed to have the strongest fundraising potential and appeal to constituencies outside the neighborhood.¹⁰ Their report concludes that each of these three options has “strong potential to serve the local community and the public interest, leverage funds from governments and the private sector, and sustain its operations over time.”¹¹

The “Green Barn” component, which would ideally make use of the southernmost fourth or fifth barn, emerged in response to Artscape’s Wychwood Barns Arts and Community Survey. The proposal was written by The Green Barn Steering Committee, composed of people from two non-profit organizations (FoodShare Toronto¹²belonging....On any given day, the gardeners toiling side by side in any of Toronto’s 100 community gardens may include Vietnamese, Cambodians, Russians, Eritreans, Somalis, Ukrainians, Filipino, Italians, Greeks, Czechs, East Indians, Chinese, Lebanese or West Indians.” The Toronto Community Garden Network. cgnetwork@foodshare.net and The Stop Community Food

⁹ Jacobs, Jane, quoted by Toronto Artscape Inc, May 2002. Wychwood Barns Feasibility Study, p. 31.

¹⁰ Option 5, which retains four barns and a portion of the fifth barn for children’s outdoor playspace, represents only 18.2% of the total enclosed area of the site.

¹¹ Toronto Artscape Inc. May 2002. Wychwood Barns Feasibility Study, p. 91.

¹² Foodshare writes: “it’s no exaggeration to say that community gardening can be a powerful antidote to hunger, poverty, loneliness and cultural isolation. Gardeners say it keeps them in shape, brings family and neighbours closer, increases their food security and imparts a sense of well being and community

Centre¹³), an artist gardener, a Toronto Public Health Department dietician, and two local residents, the

authors of this article. The goals articulated in “Dream of a Green Barn,” were:

To provide a public space for spontaneous enjoyment and planned activities where people of diverse backgrounds can socialize, eat, meet their neighbours, and learn about food and

nutrition, environment-friendly practices, social justice and the arts

To allow local people from diverse backgrounds to grow plants from their homelands

To increase availability of fresh, healthy and safe food for the community

To act as a showcase for innovative and environmentally-friendly growing, building and energy production methods

To provide a place for local schools and others to learn about horticulture and greenhouse production techniques, cultural heritage, environmental issues and the inter-connectedness

between food, water, energy and the environment

To provide a catalyst for neighbourhood and community development.¹⁴

¹³ See <http://www.thestop.org/>

¹⁴ The full “Dream of a Green Barn” may be viewed at <http://www.anewpark.ca/greenbarn.php>.

Motivated by a concept of “food rights” to ensure that people have sufficient access to healthy food, and by experiences in urban agriculture, community gardening, and green politics, this ‘dream’ springs from the grassroots, rather than suburban grass, tradition of “amateur gardeners, community activists, and a great many people working in the unofficial ‘voluntary’ sector of the economy.”¹⁵ This tradition has brought us neighborhood economic development, squat cities, people’s parks, the urban muralist movement, neighborhood greenhouses, food co-ops, cluster housing, “open space” and “green city” campaigns. “These projects,” noted Alex Wilson, “represent a radical critique of modernity and its relationship with nature.”¹⁶

In May 2002, the Green Barn Steering Committee contracted SunArts Design to do a study of the feasibility of the greenhouse and protected gardens. SunArts Design produced some preliminary designs for the Greenbarn that would preserve the existing brick structure to create an open, public, year-round green space:

INSERT DRAWING HERE

On the issue of finding a balance between the need for a park and the need to retain industrial heritage,

landscape architect David Orsini commented:

There is a strong parallel between the underlying principles of ecosystem sustainability and the sustainability of the Green Barn. Ecologists believe that the sustainability of an ecosystem is in large part based on the diversity of that ecosystem. A diverse ecosystem, as characterized by a diverse number of species, has greater resilience to endure and adapt over time through changes and environmental stresses. The Green Barn, too, will have greater ability to endure and adapt over time to changing demographic and financial conditions through its diverse number of functions and activities. This diversity will also assist the Green Barn in attracting and sustaining donors and funding partnerships.¹⁷

Funding for this report, and for further development of the Green Barn, was secured by December 2001, when the Green Barn Steering Committee was awarded a \$500,000.00 grant for the project. Further

¹⁵Wilson, Alexander. 1991. *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Toronto: Between the Lines, p. 108.

¹⁶Wilson, Alexander. *ibid.*.

¹⁷ Orsini, David. September 6 2002, *Growing Opportunities: Creating a Sustainable Green Barn for the Wychwood Community*, unpublished report, p. 12.

fundraising, and even an announcement of this fundraising success, awaits city councillors' approval of a park plan.

Besides Councillor Mihevc, Taddlewood, Artscape, The Green Barn Steering Committee, the other key figures in the shaping of the new park have been two community advocacy groups.

The first group is Neighbours for 100% Park, later renamed Neighbours for 100% Green Park (hereafter: Neighbours) Since more than one journalist has called them NIMBYists ("Not In My Backyard"), they describe themselves as "PIMBY"(Park In My Backyard"). As their website makes clear, they:
favour a traditional park at the Wychwood Car Barns site. Trees, grass, flowers, fountain, greensward, benches & kids' recreational facilities. The usual respite from the sturm & drang. In short, we favour a natural Park that will dovetail with St Clair Ave as envisioned by the City's Official Plan.¹⁸

This view of a "traditional park" represents a private landscape view for their own visual enjoyment, in other words a pastoralist extension of their front and backyards, combined with the legacy of the playgrounds movement, whose goal was to "convince the public of the beneficial aspects of play and games and see that 'supervised' recreation of all types was provided."¹⁹ Oblivious to the history of this movement, as well as to the present state of economic crisis in the parks system caused by underfunding, they have, in the name of a "natural park," repeatedly tried to freeze the whole park planning and development process at the moment two and a half years earlier when Option 4 was approved by City Council. They have launched a barrage of criticism against Councillor Mihevc and Artscape for continuing to discuss options after the Option 4 Survey, and against anybody speaking in favor of the retention and reuse of the carbarns, denouncing them as "outside," "special," "business" and even "discriminatory" interests. They suggest that the local Councillor and residents who are opposed to a drive-thru McDonald's should also be opposed to an Artscape "drive-thru."²⁰ They circulate rumours that

¹⁸ <http://www.truepatriotlove.com/>, accessed September 29, 2002

¹⁹ Wilson, Alexander. 1991. *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*. Toronto: Between the Lines, p. 24.

²⁰ For information on the community struggle against the McDonald's drive-through at St Clair and Christie see www.welivehere.com .

the Green Barn means a food depot for poor people and that artists' residences mean drugs and illicit behaviours. They proclaim that their "only interest here is ensuring that the citizens near ground zero are fully apprised of what's in store."²¹

They also claim to speak for, and not just to, local "youth," who are in their view better served by a skateboarding facility than by community art facilities and a food-growing and environmental education centre whose development is supported by every school principal within five kilometres of the site. At each public meeting, the same young, white, male teenager stands up to speak on behalf of all youth and to inveigh against the Artscape proposals, which are described as "discriminatory" against youth. The young are constructed as a social category that can be fairly represented by one speaker, inferring that the interests of the young are obvious, natural, and universal. Traditionally, supervised recreational activities for children have indeed been located in parks, but nothing precludes other cultural activities from being located there too. The debates have presented conflicting interpretations of what children and teenagers need and want from recreation and leisure activities, exacerbated by the loss of school programs and resources, and differing assumptions about how these recreation facilities may contribute to their well-being and development. For opponents of carbarn preservation, children "naturally" need parks, and empty green space in particular, to enact their universal sporty childhoodness, and some of their own children are prepared (sic) to get up and denounce Mihevc and Artscape on this basis.

At the Midtown City Council hearings of September 2002, the co-chair of Neighbours and the President of the Wychwood Ratepayers Association began their depositions by identifying themselves as "artists." Ironically, their website denounces any notion of a cultural economy in which the arts contribute to economic development. Whether speaking on behalf of children or adults, culture has no place in their green park, which will emerge not as the product of culture but of the Department of Parks and Recreation. According to the "glossary" on their website, "the merits" of "Culture" "lie in the eyes of the beholder" and "[t]he economic argument that has arts & sports subsidies spinning wealth from a hitherto bleak landscape has been widely debunked, most recently by the CD Howe Institute." In the same vein, the

²¹ <http://www.truepatriotlove.com/>, accessed September 29, 2002

terms “community,” as well as “community spirit, community way, community involvement, community based” are “used to camouflage craven self interest by uplifting the human condition.”²² (We might speculate that this gem from the C.D. Howe Institute, a right-wing think-tank, was obligatory bedtime reading for their children, except that these children stand up and represent their peer group against Artscape most passionately in the name of organized sports.) To complete this profile of their highly contradictory self-representation, while some of them live in a residential park designed for artists, they denounce the idea that a “park” could contain buildings, let alone resident artists. They seem to be possessed by the conviction that art is quite antithetical to greenness and heritage preservation. It would be interesting to see their art.

Members of this group have attempted to influence the position of two local ratepayers associations on the issue of the development of the carbarns. Through their interventions at a meeting of the Hillcrest Ratepayers Association in February, 2002, Neighbours claim that “In the recorded vote of all present, The Hillcrest Residents Association endorsed returning the Car Barns Park & the implementation reports to its Oct 2000 100% Park status.” But the meeting was so filled with confusion and procedural irregularities, including the failure to validate who had voting rights, that the President of the Hillcrest Ratepayers Association said afterwards that “there is no way of saying who voted for what” and that “the vote doesn't represent the position of the Hillcrest ratepayers executive.”²³ (Indeed this may be the only occasion throughout whole process where “outsiders” really did manipulate an agenda.)

In the Wychwood Ratepayer’s Association, many were unaware of the position that their President (owner of the big house in Wychwood Park mentioned above) was advancing in the name of Wychwood Park ratepayers. Representing her own adamant opposition to the Artscape proposals as representative of

²²<http://www.truepatriotlove.com/>, accessed September 29, 2002. Accusations of self-interest against cultural groups made by this enclave of right-wing neo-liberals echo a longstanding U.S. reaction to Canadian cultural policies, which is to deny their language of difference by maintaining that they are really the same, motivated by (but hiding) the universal goal of profit. We return to the theme of projection later in this discussion. Cf J. Berland, “Writing on the Border: in *CR: New Centennial Review*, 1:2, 2001.

²³<http://www.anewpark.ca/rumours.php#hill-payers>

Wychwood Park as a whole, she endorsed the Neighbours' petition to stop the "art park" before any meeting of the Wychwood Park Ratepayers Association. Following the efforts of a new community group calling themselves Friends of a New Park, her anti-Artscape position became public knowledge and finally came under review and debate during the Wychwood Ratepayers Association in March 2002. The resulting resolution supported the "Option 4" consensus from the 2000 survey but left the door wide open to a new consensus. They agreed to involve themselves and support further community consultation for "all who wish to participate in the planning of a park design that serves the needs of the larger community... and the need to preserve the heritage characteristics of Wychwood Park.." ²⁴ Wychwood Park residents are now waiting for their executive board to resign so that a new president and a new board can be elected.

The Friends of a New Park (hereafter Friends) originally formed in response to what some of their members heard at the January 22, 2002 public meeting. They were troubled by the extreme negative reaction to Artscape's preliminary proposals for reuse of the five carbarns, and the degree to which the Neighbours succeeded in monopolizing public space with their outraged expressions of conspiracy and betrayal. Friends are composed of gardeners, artists, heritage advocates, teachers, and others from the neighbourhood who concur that "the site has enormous potential for the creation and consolidation of a community," that "community" is created through "honest dialogue and compromise" and that "green space and saving one of our area's last remaining significant heritage structures are not mutually exclusive concepts." ²⁵ Unlike Neighbours, who hide behind anonymity, their steering committee and two hundred "friends" list their names on the website. The group's website includes an image gallery ²⁶ and an archive of the political process with detailed rebuttal of each of the Neighbours' fear-mongering claims. ²⁷ They

²⁴ <http://www.anewpark.ca/rumours.php#wych-payers>

²⁵ <http://www.anewpark.ca/index.php> and <http://www.anewpark.ca/whoweare.php>, accessed September 29, 2002

²⁶ <http://www.anewpark.ca/gallery.php>

²⁷ <http://www.anewpark.ca/rumours.php>

supported community consultation during Artscape's Feasibility Study and the subsequent Community Opinion Survey conducted by the city's Culture Division. They raised awareness of the site's potential to area residents and worked to convince the public of the beneficial aspects of the ideas that emerged through the consultation process. Friends produced and distributed 7000 copies of a brochure inviting people to get involved and voice their opinion so that their views could be included in the Artscape's community consultation process. They organized a Heritage Day event to tour the carbarns and hear Architect Philip Goldsmith, writer/historian Mike Filey and others tell the story of the barns, attended by several hundred people. They joined Councillor Mihevc's Environment Day, Taddlewood's "Springfest," and two Feasibility Study Open Houses, and they campaigned to encourage people to complete and return the Culture Division's Community Survey. They acted not only as advocates but as animators, seeking to ensure that the public would be well represented in the consultation process and in the park itself.

In contrast to Neighbours, for whom the meaning of 'park' is self-evident and obvious, Friends invited the city to imagine the park and to think about what people actually and might possibly do in parks.

This is how their website invokes the imagined park:

Gardens and parks have always reflected the values of their creators. Think of traditional English gardens, with their tumble and profusion of vines and roses, or classical Italian gardens, with their elegant symmetry.... [or] the conventional North American suburban yard, with its tidy lawns, its careful division of grass from flowers, bushes, and the house, and its ruthless battle against weeds and wildflowers, conveys deeply held attitudes about nature, nurture, cars, and the family home.

...The final design of the park, once it has been completed through discussions between the city, the parks division, and residents of the neighbourhood, will also tell us something about ourselves. So far, this is some of what the community has imagined. Our park could provide a home for native plants like white and red oak and pine, or beech, maple, black cherry, rock elm, and red bud....there could be prairie plantings of Indian grass, gamma grass, Canada rye and other tall grasses, helianthus and other wild sunflowers, New England asters, meadow rue and other native flowers. These plantings, or other garden clusters, could flourish on a newly landscaped parkland, moving gently down from Christie and Benson, where the land is the highest, across a field or grove to the west of the barn(s), with groves or gardens along the south-west side of the park.

... Our park could provide a safe play area for children, with a small landscaped piazza nearby for people of all ages to sit, relax, meet one another, keep an eye on the children, or just enjoy the scenery. It could include large grassy areas for soccer or other games, or just for walks in good weather. Visitors could warm their lunch in the community bake oven, visit the greenhouse, walk through the sheltered gardens, give a hand with moving a plant, or just hang out waiting to see who comes along for a chat. Our park could contain a sheltered garden, where the brick walls preserved from the barns would shelter plants that our neighbours have brought from their home cultures. Without such protection these plants would surely freeze to death in our Canadian winters; plants like olives and figs, or plants native to slightly warmer

areas of North America such as the Osage Orange, which grows in Pennsylvania and might thrive here in a sheltered place....With a sheltered garden, we would be showing our commitment not only to green space, but also to a "green agenda": the glazing and brick walls would capture heat during sunny winter days, and rainwater could be harvested for irrigation. With this economical use of its resources, our wintergarden could teach hope as well as delight to our community.

Our park could house a greenhouse, with green plants to admire and learn about twelve months of the year, and with lessons about plant life, the gardening and food heritages of diverse cultures, new sources for alternative energy, the growth of various kinds of plants in protected environments, and the cycles of nature, to teach to our children or anyone who might care to listen. The greenhouse, like the wintergarden, could benefit from natural sources of sunlight and water, and like the wintergarden, would welcome community involvement and visits twelve months of the year.

... In the last few years many inventive new ideas have been brought to the design of parks and gardens. Landscapers have attempted to encourage greater harmony between diverse plant and animal life, inside and outside, landscape and building, beauty and movement, "native" plants and plants brought in simply because we love them. With our new park, we have the opportunity to learn not only from these ideas, but also from each other. Our park can truly reflect our community, with its love of plants and green space, its commitment to lasting green values, and its willingness to listen and learn.²⁸

Friends rejected the exclusionary mentality of Neighbours in favor of more inclusive definitions of civility and ideas of public interest and common good. Ioan Davies, in theorizing Toronto, wanted to “preserve notions of space (physically, kinetically, culturally) and of communication as important parts of our sense of community, and thus to talk about the habitable city—both in the imagination and the everyday.”²⁹15-16 The “park” they imagined was not a conventional “grassy park with trees” but a palimpsest of natural history, industrial history, culture, and green politics. Friends and the Green Barn Steering Committee talked about involving the diverse cultures and ethnicities in the neighbourhood with programs in cooking, ethnobotany, environmental education, and gardening.

Whereas the problem of “park deficiency” finds a simple solution in 100% Green Park, others see that the real deficiency for urban dwellers is public, mixed use spaces where people can safely interact with others. As environmental studies professor Roger Keil aptly put it: What we are missing, throughout the city, is an abundance of public open – not just green – spaces that work year round. The Car Barns offer a unique opportunity to provide such a space for a large and diverse number of citizens and uses. The structures could be a park inside a park, where artists, gardeners and others could work and share their activities in a variety of ways with onlookers, participants, and

²⁸ For the full text see “Imagine”: <http://www.anewpark.ca/park.php>

²⁹ Davies, Ioan. 2000. Theorizing Toronto. *Topia: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3, p.

passers-by.... [A] truly urban park...must be able to integrate the desire for more urban green space with the complex nature of the city. The Car Barns are the switching yard for this integration. For this integration to work, the City must courageously take up but ultimately go beyond the recommendations of the Halstead Report of June 17, 2002 and retain all five, not just three of the existing barns. Any artificial distinction between the “green open space” outside and “industrial heritage” inside must be rejected and attempts to compromise the retention of the structures through single minded claims for an alleged green exterior must be resisted. ³⁰<http://www.anewpark.ca/comments.php>, accessed on September 29, 2002.

This returns us to our historical narrative and to the Halstead Report—named after Joe Halstead, Toronto’s Commissioner of Economic Development, Culture and Tourism-- whose purpose was to respond to the Artscape Feasibility Study and the results of a community opinion survey of the options presented by Artscape. In May 2002, community members were asked which option makes the best use of the site in terms of meeting community needs, and which option would best serve the surrounding community. This time 981 people returned the surveys. The majority (43%) indicated the five-barn option best met community and neighborhood needs. Minus the incomplete surveys, 58% of respondents on both questions favoured the retention of four to five barns. 27% favoured saving between one and four barns, and 30% completely rejected all of the options and any Artscape involvement. Most respondents rejecting all options used marked-up copies of the survey supplied by Neighbours.

The Halstead Report also presented a preliminary park concept from Parks and Recreation planning staff based on the retention of the three most northerly barns:

INSERT PRELIMINARY PARK CONCEPT HERE

The report states that “until the park planning process is complete, no portion of the barns should be demolished”³¹ In seeking a balance between maximizing “the green open space and retention of the industrial heritage buildings” the Culture Division advocates an option that few of the community survey respondents actually chose, because Park staff informed them that saving four to five barns “limits the open area on the site and limits flexibility in implementing the draft park program”³² As far as the

³⁰Keil, Roger. September 16 2002, letter to Midtown Community Council

³¹ Halstead, Joe. Toronto Artscape Feasibility Report on the Possible Adaptive Reuse of the Wychwood Barns, June 17, 2002, p. 9.

³² Haltstead, Joe. *ibid.*, p. 10.

Halstead Report goes, buildings and park are still mutually exclusive entities.³³ Whether this dichotomy can be dissolved will have to await the outcome of a “site plan and urban design exercise” to be coordinated with park research and planning.

On September 17, 2002, the Halstead Report was considered by the Midtown Community Council. During the meeting, much delayed by debate over the first Official Plan for the amalgamated City of Toronto, Councillors Mihevc, Flint, Walker, and Minan-Wong heard forty-five depositions from residents and other interested parties. As Christopher Hume summarized in the *Star*, Neighbours would not allow the “expectations of the larger community to interfere” with their views, and made arguments that “were unabashedly selfish.” The “low point,” he adds, “came when a couple dragged their 10-year-old child to the meeting to denounce Councillor Mihevc.”³⁴

By the time the councillors began their debate over whether to endorse the recommendations or not, it was 1:30 am, and the conditions and energy for rational debate and conscientious political decision-making had totally deteriorated. Following a 2-1 vote, the Report was referred back to Joe Halstead, with a request that he conduct further community consultation on the options discussed at this meeting and report back in November. The future of the new park will depend not only on how the community imagines the place but also on how the political institution of city government gives shape to this imagination.

Mediascape

Both sides in the contest over the meanings of a “park” took advantage of the Internet and the WWW to organize themselves, mobilize supporters, and propagate their views. Before we jump to any conclusions about netizens and digital democracy, we need to remember that the democratic possibilities of new media depend on people’s practices, the resources they draw on, their experience of the social

³³ For a discussion of buildings in parks, see Hazel Conway and David Lambert, Buildings and monuments, in J. Woudstra and K. Fieldhouse (Eds.), *The Regeneration of Public Parks* (London: The Garden History Society Landscape Design Trust and E & F Spon, 2000, pp. 45-58.

³⁴ Hume, Christopher. September 19, 2002. A Nimby Vision for Toronto: Residents oppose plans for TTC site. *The Toronto Star*, p. B1.

world and how it weighs upon them, their conceptions of politics, and their notions of citizenship. The stark contrast between www.truepatriotlove.com and anewpark.ca also reminds us that, to cite Davies once again, to think about the culture of Toronto is to “think about the bourgeoisie in its different guises”.³⁵ For those in the patriotic guise, the idea of the civic is bound up with private property and territoriality (hence, the call to other ‘ratepayers’ to join their cause) and with a belief in the inherent justness of the market. For these neoliberals, public works projects, or any art sponsored by the state, are “defective in practice and intent,”³⁶ and represent nothing but a “land grab” by “special interests”³⁷ Friends, on the other hand, is largely comprised of members of the cultured lumpenproletariat, academics, creative cultural workers of the community, gardeners, and journalists in the older, print media. While both groups launched websites, an examination of the print media reveals the failure of the bourgeoisie in its neo-liberal “patriot” guise to set the terms and agenda of the wider public debate.³⁸<http://inallthyscommand.mainpage.net>

Initially the park issue was represented in the press as a dispute between two opposing local groups who had divided the community, rather like tribes competing over a contested field. After the January 22, 2002 meeting, the *Toronto Star* reported that “Residents oppose plans for TTC site,” citing opponents of Artscape’s proposals and Taddlewood’s commitment to raising matching funds.³⁹ In February, the issue came to national attention in the *National Post*, the same day as Taddlewood’s Sweet on the Park Fundraiser, described by the *Post* (to our amusement) as a gathering of 400 of Toronto’s “left-

³⁵ Davies, Ioan. 2000. Theorizing Toronto. *Topia: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3, p. 20.

³⁶ Davies, Ioan, *ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁷ McConnell, Amy. September 30, 2002. Artscape a radical landgrab. *The Toronto Star*, p. A23.

³⁸ The only print publication that responded to their agenda was a new, tabloid-style, advertiser-supported community newsletter called *Public Notice*. The first two issues, which featured unsigned articles and an anti-Artscape and Mihevc slant, were delivered to households near the Wychwood carbarns site. The Neighbours website prompted one local youth to cyberparody; see

³⁹ Walker, Susan. January 24, 2002. Residents oppose plans for TTC site. *The Toronto Star*, p. B3.

leaning elite.” The article features a photograph of the President of the Wychwood Ratepayer’s Association in front of the barns. She is quoted as saying: “I love Artscape. I think what they’ve done for artists is great—on Queen Street and Toronto Island, just not up here...What if my friend Fran wants to have a dinner party? Where are her guests going to park?”⁴⁰

The *Globe and Mail* offered a column titled “Wychwood gift horse's teeth smashed,” in which John Barber rehearses the municipal election campaign promises to build a new park, and quotes ex-councillor Howard Levine, whose home is located next door to the site, saying the process is “an unbelievable disaster” involving “political chicanery of the worst kind.”⁴¹ Barber describes how the neighborhood has been “split into two camps”—one supporting a preliminary plan to preserve barns and another that wants “nothing but grass”. He says that both sides appear to have “their own forms of delusion;” the head of the “anti” forces is opposed to anything new being built because “guests at her friend's dinner party won't have any place to park.” On the other hand, supporters are deluded by “beautiful pictures of wonderful amenities that nobody has the money to build.”⁴² - Bob Hanke, Jody Berland, Kevin Frank, Bernadette

⁴⁰ Mackay, Brad. February 16, 2002. Compromise or betrayal? *National Post*, p. T01.

⁴¹ Barber, John. February 27, 2002. Wychwood gift horse’s teeth smashed. *Globe and Mail*, p. A18.

⁴² Like other letters written (but unpublished) in response to journalists’ accounts of the process, this letter was posted on the Friends website:

To the editor of the *Globe and Mail*,
Given John Barber's shallow, selective treatment of the Wychwood CarBarns Park (Wednesday, February 27, 2002 - Page A18), it is clear that he doesn't understand what this project means to the community and how it is bringing us together. At the community design charette he didn't attend or even mention, there was a clear community consensus for an innovative, unique, non-traditional city park. Would he consider ROM President William Thorsell to be "dealing in a form of delusion" by displaying architect's proposals for renovation, and even announcing a winning design, even though there is no money committed from governments or foundations? The City asked Artscape to do a feasibility study which is not yet completed, so nobody--not least the residents, who have yet to see all the proposed options as well as the reasoning, costs, and funding formulas behind them--has committed to anything. Like the ROM's chosen architect Daniel Libeskind, we believe that form can follow fantasy. An imaginative yet practical plan will be the result of the public process now underway and broad community participation will ensure we identify the best options. The new park is a symbol of and for community, and now is the time to dream about what can be achieved.

Peets, Schuster Gindin, Dan Minkin, Alan & Catherine Seymore, Dan Diamond, Carol McLaughlin, Debra Slack, Peter McKendrick, Mary Jane Baillie Nothing appeared in print again until March, when *NOW Magazine* also framed the story in terms of a conflict between opposing groups under the headline “No Walk in the Park: What’s Tony Wychwood Got Against Artists?”⁴³ This article makes the claim that the Wychwood Ratepayers Association “speaks for the upscale gated community” when by this time the reality was more complex.

More substantial treatments of the struggle over the definition of a park appeared several months later with Christopher Hume’s “More than a place to park yourself” and John Lorinc’s longer study for *Toronto Life*, “Greened Acres.”⁴⁴ Hume, architecture critic for the *Toronto Star*, asked readers to consider “What exactly defines a park?” He traces the history of the Olmsteadian tradition, represented in Toronto by High Park, and the tradition upheld by Toronto’s more typical parks, like Riverdale Park East, built on a former landfill site. Hume criticizes the latter as a “green desert;” “if this represents nature,” he adds, “it is nature under a fascist regime.” Comparing this model to the popular Village of Yorkville Park, whose construction costs caused enormous controversy, he argues that “green space...may offer endless potential, but it presents few real possibilities, especially on so small a scale.”⁴⁵ The Wychwood site “will be as reflective of the political landscape as the natural terrain.” The call for “100 per cent green space” is now represented as a demand that the new park be abandoned by all but local users, that the park be “reinvented as social barriers instead of mixing grounds.”

John Lorinc’s “Green Acres” digs beneath the political dirt to tackle “the issues at the heart of the controversy—what kind of park the Wychwood site should become, how it will be used and who will pay

⁴³ Anderson, Scott. March 7-13, 2002. No Walk in the Park: What’s Tony Wychwood Got Against Artists? *NOW Magazine*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ Hume, Christopher. March 23, 2002. More than a place to park yourself. *The Toronto Star*, pp. J1, J14; Lorinc, John. July 2002. Green acres. *Toronto Life*, pp. 57-62.

⁴⁵ For more on the Village of Yorkville Park, see Alan Tate, *Great City Parks*. London and New York: Spon Press.

the tab.”⁴⁶ In his analysis, the controversy is a “symptom” of a parks system in crisis: Toronto lags behind U.S. cities in per capita and per acre expenditures on parkland. Lorinc argues against the common sense notion that the solution to the “park deficiency” problem is more “purposeless open space—marginal parkettes adorned with a bit of grass, some sad-sack trees and a few benches upon which no one ever sits.”⁴⁷ Any alternative to creating another banal park must consider the issue of design and the way parks are used. Post-Olmsteadian urban planning and citizen-led advocacy groups represent a fundamental rethinking of parks as open, public space.

Through these press portrayals, the demand for 100% green space has been substantially reframed. No longer identified with a neighbourhood striving to protect its green space, it is now represented as the defensive rhetoric of a small group. The *Toronto Star* was not alone in recognizing the “NIMBYism” at work. Even the *National Post* noted the “agit-prop” tactics being used and their penchant for “conspiracy theories and uber-NIMBY invective”.⁴⁸ Michele Landsberg described the Neighbours with their “choked rage and personal vitriol” as a “small but venomous hornet’s nest of opposition to the park.”⁴⁹ These depictions recognize a dismaying contradiction between the cozy “naturalist” emphasis on green space, and the fierce atmosphere of political intimidation within which this demand is framed. Lorinc, Hume and Landsberg make it clear that the Wychwood carbarns site has the potential to be a cultural and historical park—an innovative and unique alternative to the traditional park building and to pedestrian (and dog-walker’s) conceptions of parkland. “When I think of all the connections that might be kindled and the talents that might be helped to flower,” Landsberg writes, “the possibilities seem thrilling.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Lorinc, *op cit*, p. 57.

⁴⁷ Lorinc, *op cit*, p. 59.

⁴⁸ Polo, Marco. July 6, 2002. The battle of the barns: Residents and politicians debate the future of the TTC streetcar barns. *National Post*, p. PH12.

⁴⁹ Landsberg, Michele. September 29, 2002. Allow artful lodgers to revitalize site. *The Toronto Star*, p. A2.

⁵⁰ Landsberg, *op cit*.

The Sky's the Limit

In the debate about the future of the Wychwood Car Barns site, the two advocacy groups not only seek different outcomes, they also speak different languages. The language of Neighbours is suffused with resentment and projection, aimed at inciting a collective preoccupation with possible improprieties in political procedure (none of which have been corroborated by legal or accounting investigations initiated by them). They speak not of what could happen in this space, but of how they have been betrayed since Option 4 was chosen in 2000. A lot more could be said about the weight of projection in this dispute, wherein a small, affluent, tireless group denounces and inveighs against the larger community for involving “outsiders” and “special interests.” Their bravado has resulted in meeting takeovers and anonymous publications, but not in any act of imagination or even a specification of what plants they might prefer. In that respect they have devolved from Taddlewood, whose idea of a Carolinian forest on the site mobilized people and won the transfer of the TTC barns to city property. Their “park” excludes everything but an extension of spacious and exclusive private lawns punctuating the urban horizon. They never mention dogs, Taddlewood Creek, or cherry orchards haunting the landfill. Their arguments do not touch on ecological restoration or landscape design. They are not attached to any vision of landscape in particular, but rather to the defensive valorization of landscape in general. They aim to fix the meanings of the multi-accentual sign “park”, and thus win control over the space. Unlike a landscape, their views have not changed with time.

For these reasons, Neighbours have not succeeded in winning consent to their definition of a park among their neighbours and the wider public. Friends, in contrast, have shown a willingness to entertain a variety of visions of the park and to change their visions in response to emerging images and ideas. Their positive approach to the potentialities of the carbarns site is indissoluble from their more attitude toward community. The idea that a green space (inside/outside the barns) and a cultural space would reflect the contributions of the people who surround or came before it is embraced as a valued prospect; the park is not an escape, but a gathering place. Nature does not have to be physically or semiotically separated from

culture, for they are totally imbricated with one another, for good or for ill. Seeing the park as both the outcome and the starting place for an involved community is the crucial point of consensus for Friends: An important advantage of the site is its existence in the community right now. The support the creation of the park has drawn from the community would not have happened 10 or 15 years ago, and might not be possible 10 or 15 years from now. There is an eclectic mix of intellectuals and artists and environmentally minded families now living nearby who are shaping a phenomenal visions for the park.⁵¹

The growth process of this neighbourhood has reiterated the ancient etymological link between culture and green space: the human capacity to cultivate nature, or agriculture, and a willingness to re-enact and celebrate this interaction rather than obscure it with an abstract landscape. Besides connecting gardeners , cultural producers and educators, Friends enjoy challenges to the imagination. They thrive on being confronted by something that does not exist, has never existed, could exist if imagination were matched by resources. This capacity distinguishes Friends, the local councillor, and many neighbours from the opponents to barn restoration, whose minds are so made up.

We asked some of the participants about how their ideas about parks had changed over time, and how they imagined the potential for a new park at the carbarns site. Their responses shared a common theme: the fascination with the possibility of an outcome that actualized their own imaginative growth. “The sky’s the limit,” said two of them in separate communications. “I think the possibilities begin by reusing an old building and from there,” said one, “the sky is the limit.” “Who knows how much a park can add to the cultural mix of a city?” asks another. “I would say the sky is the limit.” “There is no memory of the site as pristine nature,” added the second respondent, artist/gardener Gene Threndyle; Most likely we would settle for the cultural notion of nature as grass and trees.... Juxtaposing plants with standard recreational activities like dog walking and frisbee playing means that you have to think how you can protect plants and communities of plants. At the point protection is built, it becomes a facility. That’s why so many parks except the big ones are just lawn and trees.⁵²

Here the “grass and trees” that the Neighbours so long for becomes not an ideal but a dull compromise

⁵¹ Roscoe Handford, email correspondence, August 21 2002.

⁵² Roscoe Handford, email correspondence, August 21 2002; Gene Threndyle, email correspondence, August 20 2002.

catering to dogs and reduced budgets.

The creative potential of urban parks was reiterated by other urban activists who responded to our queries. “Instead of ossifying some fictional ideal of nature adoration,” writes Roger Keil, a park as urban as Wychwood needs to respond to the debate between the social and the natural in a dynamic--that is changeable--manner. Interestingly, the future existence of the barns is crucial to this enterprise, as the built spaces will guard against the naturalization of nature (which is really only a reification of bourgeois ideas of nature). An urban park must be the exhibition of the societal relationships with nature in the city.⁵³

Similarly, Councillor Mihevc argues that:

A park is never just a park – it is the fruit of tremendous thought and passion of the local community. The Olmstead vision of a park--ie a piece of nature in the midst of a concrete jungle--just doesn't cut it any more. A park is an experience, a place of encounter with oneself, between people and the natural environment.... This is all to say that I have come to discover that a park is not about grass and trees. The starting point has to be to imagine the kinds of interactions that one wants to see and then building the park around that.⁵⁴

Initially, Mihevc was inspired by the Taddlewood Heritage Association's portrayal of a restored forest in the site, with the barns as distant a memory as the orchards and tannery that preceded them. But the process of working with local activists and groups like Artscape and the Green Barn Steering Committee changed that vision, as it did for many others. As Roscoe Handford, a member of the Artscape advisory committee and a steering committee member of Friends put it,

I think the only people who cannot be supplied with their dream come true are the people who envision a wildlife preserve there. I've heard it suggested a few times that a portion of the park should be allowed to revert back to its original state, and we should encourage raccoons and foxes and so on to live there. I just don't think there's enough room, and it would be dangerous to the animals.⁵⁵

Animals? Trees? You mean, we are supposed to care about them? Why would people who are

⁵³ Roger Keil, email correspondence, August 22, 2002.

⁵⁴ Joe Mihevc, email correspondence, September 5, 2002.

⁵⁵ Roscoe Handford, email correspondence, August 21, 2002.

environmentalists at heart not wish to build a forest in their neighbourhood?

That is a rhetorical question, of course, but one we needed to ask ourselves. Were we abandoning nature in the name of cultural politics? Environmental thought today suggests that “the only thing that’s really in danger of ending is a romantic, pantheistic idea of nature that we invented in the first place, one whose passing might well turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Useful as it has been in helping us protect the sacred 8 percent, it nevertheless has failed to prevent us from doing a great deal of damage to the remaining 92 percent.”⁵⁶ These voices and ideas were taken up in Berland’s deputation to the Midtown City Council in September 2002, which seemed to speak for many at the meeting.

...You can only have a feeling for a place if one place is different from another and you can recognize it when you get up in the morning. Our sense of place is further enhanced when we have contributed to making it, even if it is just painting a wall or planting a tree. In turn, walls and trees honour the memories of those who came before us who built the places we live and work.

I am not saying that every building should be kept just because it is there. I am saying that we are the curators of a living city. We should not have to defend the preservation of buildings every time someone wishes to demolish them. This idea has become especially poignant in the shadow of extensive land privatization and an environmental crisis that makes us distrust the air we breathe, the water we drink, the plants we nurture and eat. We can no longer pretend that natural resources are the way they are because they are nature. They reflect our actions and values as much as buildings do; when we look at a landscape we are looking at ourselves. Just as there is no park without money, so there is no nature without a history of human interventions. Nature can no longer be seen as a playground or costly vista for tired urbanites. We must accept responsibility for the totality of our environment and interact with it in responsible and hopeful ways.

We could tear down the Barns and make this part of the city just like every other part, as though we too wish to eliminate the memories of our predecessors. But precisely because our relationship to nature is in crisis, we need to learn new values and teach these new values to future generations. In the context of a 4-acre park in an urban residential area, we can’t create a pristine wilderness with clean water and happy animals. We don’t have the money, the space, or the climate for this idyllic vision to thrive between Christie and Wychwood. But we can create a Green Barn that celebrates the past labour and efforts of those who built our city and our transit system, and creatively faces the future, cultivating and demonstrating plants, energy, and community, all year round. This is history, architecture and nature reunified, bringing people together in a beautiful green public space that shows us how we can change. The Green Barn can teach us about composting, alternative energy, indigenous plants, organic gardening, public imagination, and the plants and cooking heritages of the diverse cultures that comprise our community. It can gather us together, provide a focal point for celebrations and enhance the food that makes such celebrations possible.

The Green Barn vision was born from Artscape’s efforts to restore the Barns and transform them into living spaces for the arts. It was artists who first taught us to appreciate landscape and perspective, two essential underpinnings of the modernist era because of their ability to distance observers from the

⁵⁶ Michael Pollan, *op cit.*, p.205.

physical world and to make that world measurable. It will be artists and gardeners who teach us new ways to live with the natural world. This synchronicity between gardeners, plants, artists, trees, and community use, will do more to enhance our environmental well-being and public safety than another under-funded, under-used, under-achieving city park.⁵⁷

New urbanists

But Look, While the Cities Overgrow We Are Making Pictures.... is this the last anarchism left to us – the space between two cities?⁵⁸

In a recent essay, Don Alexander summarizes three approaches to analysing interactions between citizens and public spaces within urban studies. The first focuses on the decline in public space in general, noting the loss of “third places” that were neither homes nor places of work and commerce, like coffee shops and community centres, in contemporary urban redevelopments. The second emphasizes the environmental damage of urban sprawl, addressing the city as part of an ecosystem with destructive effects on its watersheds and bioregions. The third approach emphasizes the growing importance of urban economies in the context of globalization, and the need for more political autonomy for cities so that they can better manage their economic and environmental relations. All of these, Alexander notes, point to a new approach to place, which no longer sees place as a “neutral container” but rather understands it to play an active role in shaping ecological, social, and individual well-being.⁵⁹

The shift to a more socially constructivist definition of place is tied, not surprisingly, to a post-modern shift in the approach to urban politics in general. In contrast with the space of modernism [David Ley writes], post-modern space aims to be historically specific, rooted in cultural, often vernacular style conventions, and often unpredictable in the relation of the parts to the whole. In reaction to the large scale of the modern movement, it attempts to create smaller units, seeks to break down a corporate society to

⁵⁷ Jody Berland, deputation to Midtown City Council, September 17 2002.

⁵⁸ Zaslove, Jerry. *Op cit.*, p. 119.

⁵⁹ Alexander, Don. Summer 2002. The Resurgence of Place: Modernism is out and building places that fit with the environment and local aspirations is in. *Alternatives*, 28(3):19.

urban villages, and maintains historical associations through renovation and recycling.⁶⁰

These theorists value the idea that a neighbourhood might prize its idiosyncracies and historical relics, rather than seeking to eliminate them in favour of some universal (read: suburban) aesthetic. This post-modern turn in urban thinking is reflected in new design principles, particularly the preference for multi-use spaces that encourage urban density and interactivity, emphasize street-level contact, and discourage dependency on the automobile.

What is striking, in this context, is how comprehensively this group of Toronto activists echos the principles outlined by contemporary environmentalists and particularly those expressed by what Alexander calls the “New Urbanists.” Did they all read Jane Jacobs, or was their eloquence simply a “natural” response to the emergent struggle between the green-parkers and site-developers?

So we sent a question to the Friends’ listserver. Not surprisingly, the replies varied:

I was influenced by an anonymous city planner in Winnipeg. My environmental ideas have been strongly influenced by being a Good Food Box Coordinator for 2 or 3 years and reading what the newsletters say. I recently read my first real Environmental Book called *A Language Older Than Words* and find that I agree with everything he says. But no, I’ve never been a student of the environment or read city planning books.⁶¹

Another response:

⁶⁰ David Ley, “Modernism, Post-modernism and the Struggle for Place,” in J. Duncan and J. Agnew, eds, *The Power of Place: Bringing Together the Geographical and Sociological Imaginations*. Boston: Unwin Hyman 1989, p. 47. Cited in Alexander, *ibid*.

⁶¹ Roscoe Handford, email correspondence, August 21, 2002.

I would think that most people have read Jane Jacobs, Jody. The first time I cracked open a book by her was about 20 years ago. When I took that workshop put on by PPS last year (they are dedicated to the work and writing of William Whyte), I found that many things that I felt intuitively were being confirmed by the study and work of people who had been actively involved in public space for years.⁶²

This respondent is right to note the “intuitive” synchronicity between new urban politics, academic work on public space, and the activist impulses of the Friends. But this isn’t necessarily because its participants had all read Jacobs or were even familiar with the wider literature and debates in urban politics:

My background is not in urban planning or development...it is in theatre. At the risk of sounding illiterate, I have not read Jane Jacobs although I have read numerous quotations from her books. I have read Gramsci’s ideas on art and culture. I have deliberately focused on the arts and culture approach to community development in Toronto. We call this cultural animation. In so doing you naturally cross paths with like minded people.⁶³

Another neighbour responded:

I think whether you know who Jane Jacobs is or not – no one involved in community building could avoid her influence – the people who she influenced were so numerous, her ideas so permeated the idea of urban living that it is inescapable. She is the one who made Cabbagetown a model community – for Torontonians – everything flowed from there.⁶⁴

Informed by a variety of educations and backgrounds, Friends’ members learned from lengthy reports written by consultants and city staff, from newsletters and reports, from one another and from the group’s website. It represents a cross-fertilization of green thinking and urban agriculturalists, landscape designers and architects, arts administrators, and artists, performers, and teachers, many of them workers in the broader sector of culture and education who sought an audience that might come to their work assembled like a community, rather than a market.⁶⁵ This civic ideal requires some commonality of space

⁶² Gene Threndyle, email correspondence, September 24 2002. Gene is referring to the Project for Public Spaces: www.pps.org / www.urbanparks.pps.org

⁶³ Elizabeth Cinello, email correspondence, September 23 2002.

⁶⁴ Lisa Rapoport, email correspondence, September 23 2002.

⁶⁵“Wasn’t it a pleasure,” noted Vid Inglevics after the launch of Industrial Strength, “to walk to an art event in the neighbourhood?” Email correspondence, September 22 2002.

and time, presence and memory. It is true that some of our correspondents detest the word “community.” But all of them advocate a turning away from the modernist emphasis on abstraction and surface, abstract value and abstract exchange; all of them envision their practice as claiming a place within a habitable urban geography.

Not surprisingly, Friends sponsored a neighbourhood art exhibition. The Industrial Strength exhibit, launched in stores along St Clair from Bathurst to Christie in September 2002, was organized by Vid Inglevics to showcase the work of fifty art students who had spent time photographing the TTC Barns in their current dusty, nostalgic state of industrial sublimity.⁶⁶ It is not uncommon to associate photography with nostalgia and the past; what is interesting is to see the modernist city emerging as a site for nostalgic representation.

What is built in the city has become the last frontier, the last horizon of memory. Inside of the camouflaging of space by power is the fear of loss of space, which has been with us since the baroque invaded the absolutist values of the Renaissance cities of Europe. No other era, however, has had the techniques of the photograph to actually document the changes and losses of the destructive acts of modernity. The photograph’s natural quality invites us into the world of the present, and yet holds us out of the exact experiential nature of that present. That is why a form of cultural revolution, which is currently underway by cultural and community organizations in the towns and cities, is trying to reinvent audiences, communities, spectators and participants who participate in the act of creating time and space. The photograph delivers a utilitarian and dialogic framework here – a pragmatics of agency.⁶⁷

It is impossible not to be struck by the overtones that are created by juxtaposing his words with these events. That is the interesting thing about the constellations of memory and place in local activism. Evoking themes of memory, participation, restoration, community, activism, and the scale of the pedestrian body, they are happening everywhere. The streets and surfaces vary from place to place, between countries, cities, even from one neighbourhood to another. Memories too vary from one person to the next, from one group of friends or allies to another. But the images we grasp of these surfaces and memories, the way they come to us through words and pictures, these are being woven together from across the globe.

⁶⁶ See <http://www.anewpark.ca/industrial/>

⁶⁷ Zaslove, Jerry. *Op cit*, p. 126.

Notes